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FM AMCONSUL KOLKATA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 2009
INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
RUEHC/DEPT OF LABOR WASHINGTON DC
RHMFIUU/DEPT OF JUSTICE WASHINGTON DC
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RHMFIUU/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 04 KOLKATA 000162

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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: BRICKS, BAGS, AND CLOTHES -- THE TIP OF THE CHILD LABOR
PROBLEM IN WEST BENGAL

REF: 06 CALCUTTA 462

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1. (U) SUMMARY: In flagrant violation of the Child Labor (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, garment, brick and leather goods manufacturing units continue to employ child laborers in West Bengal, a state where the government has shown little or no political will to deal with this problem. Between May 22 and 29 PolEconOff visited two garment factories, two brick kilns and three leather goods manufacturing units in the greater Kolkata metropolitan area, all of which utilize child labor. At each location, PolEconOff saw children as young as seven or eight years old engaged in the work of tailoring garments, mixing the clay that goes into making bricks or cutting and stitching pieces of leather to make wallets, hand bags, portfolio bags and luggage. Some pictures are available at <http://picasaweb.google.com/KolkataPolEcon/ChildLaborKolkata>. Despite anti-child labor laws being in place for over two decades and updated in 2006, children continue to be exploited and robbed of their basic rights to good health and education.
END SUMMARY

Garment Workers

2. (U) Between May 22 and 29 PolEconOff made a series of visits to manufacturing units in the greater Kolkata metropolitan area, all of which utilize child labor. On May 22, PolEconOff visited two garment factories in the Maheshtala Municipality Area, North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal. PolEconOff was accompanied by staff of the NGO Right Track which runs non-formal schools and vocational training centers in the area for child laborers in hopes of weaning away these children from work and putting them into the mainstream education system. At the first unit, we observed around ten children engaged in tailoring men's shirts, cutting fabric, and operating sewing machines. The ages of these children ranged between 7 and 16 years old. The youngest of the children (between 7 - 10 years old) sat on the floor ironing the fabric used to make the shirts.

3. (U) The factory shed had a tin roof. Although there were a few ventilation fans, the air inside the shed was stifling (summer temperatures in Kolkata regularly reach 100 degrees) and the workspace was cramped, with bales of cloth and sewing machines occupying most of the space. We were able to speak to

some of the children. Most were from North and South 24 Parganas districts which border Kolkata, there were a few children from the neighboring state of Bihar, and one from as far as Nasik in Maharashtra. One child (approximately 12 years of age) said that he was brought to the unit about a year back by his "uncle," who is a tailor in the same unit. We were not able to ascertain whether they were actually related or whether the person he referred to as "uncle" was just a neighbor or an acquaintance from his native town of Canning in South 24 Parganas district. The child is currently working as an apprentice to this "uncle" and lives with the latter's family in the same locality. The child was sewing shirt collars and sleeves. He said that they were given a day off in a week (usually Wednesdays) and that he went home to visit his family in Canning twice a month for two days at a time. On being asked whether he attended school, he said that he was not interested in studying and preferred to work in the factory.

14. (U) Another child we spoke with named Sabeer was from Bihar. He was brought to the factory by his father five years ago. When asked about his age, he said that he did not know how old he was (he looked about 12-13 years old). On being asked how much was being paid for his work, he initially said Rs. 783 (USD 19) per week. The NGO workers accompanying us said that the answer was fabricated and that in reality he was being paid far less than that. On being questioned further Sabeer then said that he earned Rs. 1000 (USD 29.40) per month. After more discussion with him, he finally said that he received Rs. 80 (USD 2) per week. This amount, the NGO workers confirmed, was the norm in the industry. Sabeer said that he lives with his father in one of the sheds just behind the factory unit. His mother and sisters live in a village in Bihar. Sabeer, like the other children we spoke to, said that he was not interested in going to school and preferred working in the factory. When asked if he had ever attended school, he said before coming to Kolkata, he went to primary school in Bihar and had studied up to the second standard (6th grade).

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15. (U) One of the NGO workers familiar with the working of the unit said that the children worked for 10 -12 hours a day with a half hour lunch break in the afternoon. However, each year in the run up to the festive season (around October -November) the children are made to work up to 16- 18 hours a day with no holidays. We visited another garment factory called "Novelty Garments" situated in the same locality. There were about seven children seen at work, aged between 7 - 16 years, although one of the adult workers said that the average age of all the workers in the unit was 16 years. Nearly all the workers were from West Bengal's Midnapore district, many from Nandigram village. We did not come across any workers from the neighboring states. Our conversations with the children at Novelty Garments was limited, as one of the adult workers was suspicious about the purpose of our visit and was reluctant to talk or let his co-workers talk to us. However, PolEconOff managed to speak briefly with one child, who used large, rusty scissors to cut strips of fabric for collars. He appeared to be about 11 years old and said he was brought to work by his "uncle." He said his family lived in a village in South 24 Parganas. He lived with his "uncle" and some other boys. He said that he was allowed to visit his family when he wanted. When asked how, he said there was a bus that goes to his village.

The Economy of a Brick Kiln

16. (U) On May 23, PolEconOff visited the United brick kiln in West Bengal's North 24 Parganas district, about 15 miles north-east of Kolkata. United is part of a cluster of brick kilns located close to Rajarhat, a burgeoning township on the fringes of Kolkata on the banks of the Bidyadhari River. United brick kiln is an unregistered kiln, meaning that it pays no minimum wage, does not comply with labor policies, and does not

provide workers with statutory benefits. Unregistered brick kilns are sometimes identifiable because the chimneys do not carry an embossed company logo. Also, at unregistered kilns, the stamp on individual bricks changes every two months or so, making it more difficult to identify any one "company" that runs the kiln. The incentive to run an unregistered kiln is that formal inspections are less likely to take place and of course the tax avoidance implications. (Note: We also heard reports of GOWB ownership of brick kilns through the use of contractors as a front, but were unable to verify these claims. End Note.)

17. (U) Registered and unregistered kilns have come up near Kolkata to meet the increasing demand for brick and construction material from the city's booming real estate sector. The number of kilns in the cluster we visited has increased from 7 to 63 in the past 15 years. There were about 80 migrant workers at the United kiln, 85 percent of whom were from Jharkhand and Bihar states. Kiln worker Sia Devi told us she was from Bihar's Sekhpura district and that her five-member family has been coming to work in the kiln for years. We also met workers who said they came from Gaya and Nawada districts in Bihar. The rest of the workers came from other districts of West Bengal.

18. (U) With wages of just Rs. 200-300 (USD 5-7) per week per family, locals do not work in the kilns. Migrant kiln laborers from Jharkhand and Bihar are tribal men, women and children who work between the months of November and July. These are lean months for agricultural laborers back in their native states. The brick kilns do not operate during the monsoon, which starts from mid-June to November. Laborers are sourced through an intricate web of brokers and agents. Kiln owners advance between Rs. 100,000 (USD 2,439) and Rs. 200,000 (USD 4,878) to local brokers at the beginning of the season. Out of this pool of funds, brokers pay between Rupees 7,000 (USD 171) and Rupees 8,000 (USD 195) per worker as an advance to the brokers in other states like Jharkhand and Bihar. Brokers keep part of the money and pay the rest as an advance to the migrant workers who often utilize it to help satisfy debts that they have incurred during the sowing season. Kiln managers also pay a travel assistance and Rupees 20 (USD 0.48) per season to workers as a medical allowance. This amount is adjusted against a worker's overall wages. The children and young workers complement the work of their parents, and are not paid separate wages.

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19. (U) A typical work day at the kiln has two shifts. The morning shift starts at 5 am and goes on till 11:30 am. The afternoon shift begins at 2:30 pm hours and ends at 6:00 pm. During the tour of the United kiln, we saw women and young boys (approximately age 11) and girls working in the scorching sun, putting mud mixture in brick moulds and arranging them in stacks. Pictures are available at <http://picasaweb.google.com/KolkataPolEcon/ChildLaborKolkata>. Children pulled wheelbarrows filled with mud and although we did not observe it, place and remove bricks in the kilns. One NGO worker told us that a boy had fallen into the kiln (there are multiple coal-loading holes in the ground surrounding the smokestack) and had died one month earlier.

10. (U) The NGO Save the Children runs a crhche at the kiln where children up to the age of six are taught and provided a meal. Kiln operators were upset with the school when it taught the children how to count. As wages are paid on the basis of the number of bricks made, kiln operators could not dupe the children who knew how to count. We asked the workers if they were able to visit the nearby towns. They all said no. Workers who had returned to the brick kilns over a period of 5-10 years had not learned any Bengali language skills, indicating that the workers are isolated from outside influences. NGO workers said that consumption of illicit liquor, company arranged video parlors (for men only) and sex are the only avenues of recreation. There is a high prevalence of sexually transmitted disease and HIV infection among migrant kiln workers. In 2003, Save the Children volunteers tested 42 United workers for HIV. Seven of them were found to be HIV positive.

Leather Goods for Export

¶11. (U) On May 29, PolEconOff visited three leather goods manufacturing units in the dark and dingy lanes of the Topsia area of Kolkata city. All the units visited were poorly ventilated and damp, and children comprising approximately 40 to 50 percent of the work force toiled in the sweltering heat without the luxury of any ceiling fans. In the first unit we visited, there were approximately 10 children, all engaged in making leather wallets - cutting leather pieces, pasting lining material and stitching the pieces together. All the children were from Bihar. All were brought to the city to work in these units by relatives who worked either in the same unit or in leather factories in the locality.

¶12. (U) One of the children called Anwar, about 12 years of age, said that he had been working at the unit for the past three years. On asking what were the working hours and how often did they get time off, Anwar said that working hours depended on the work load, if there was a large order from a buyer and a tight deadline to keep to, they worked more 18-20 hours a day without any holidays. During lean periods, they received one day off per week. Regarding wages, Mohammad Mumtaz, the most senior worker in the unit said that they were paid according to the number of wallets that they manufactured per month, which in turn depended on the orders they had to fill. He said that if they produced 200 wallets a week, the entire team of workers would get about Rs. 25 (USD 0.60) per wallet, i.e., Rs. 5,000 (USD 122) in total. They divided this amount among themselves (Mumtaz did not elaborate on how the distribution was done). Mumtaz also said that their products were made solely for export and that they did not supply any wallets the local market. He mentioned Germany and London, as export destinations. He said that the orders came through an export agency called "Shabina Exports" located in a room next to the unit in the same building, and the same company arranged for the packaging and export of the goods to foreign buyers. At the time of our visit the export agency was closed so we were not able to get more details about the specific buyers or the complete list of export destinations. The owner of the unit Mr. Shahzaad Baksh later said that he was not aware of all the countries his products were exported to as they were routed through exporters - all he knew was that they went to "America, Dubai and Germany." He mentioned two other export agencies to which he supplied goods called Sunny Exports and ACL Leather.

¶13. (U) We also visited another export oriented leather goods manufacturing unit. The manager looking after daily operations

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of the unit said that it was part of a "big company" (refusing to give its name) that employed 400 to 450 workers in total, manufacturing leather ladies' hand bags, portfolio bags, laptop bags, rolling bags, and suitcases, all destined for "foreign countries." We saw about 15 children at this unit, working on cutting leather pieces and stitching them into portfolio bags with sewing machines. The manager was very guarded and was not willing to answer any questions. At the third factory we visited, there were very few workers (about six) present, the supervisor Mr. Farooque said that the rest were on leave. We saw just one child here (about 14 years of age). Farooque said that all their products (leather hand bags, laptop bags, suit cases, rolling bags, and planners) were supplied to local buyers and named some of the well known leather goods retail stores in the city, such as Leder Land and Big Bazaar. We asked about the price of a laptop bag and Farooque said that he supplied it to the retailer for Rs. 500 (USD 12) a piece, which in turn was sold in the retail showroom for no less than Rs. 1,500 (USD 36.50). He received only Rs. 50 (USD 1.20) per bag as a "making charge" from his employer.

Comment

¶14. (U) The common refrain among the NGOs like Right Track, Save the Children and CINI Asha is that even though laws banning child labor have been in place for years, there is hardly any impetus from the state government to enforce the laws. Even the money the state government receives annually from the federal government to implement the National Child Labor Policy (NCLP) Scheme (to run special schools for rescued child laborers, provide supplementary nutrition at Rs. 5 per day to each child, health care facilities and a stipend of Rs. 100 per month) remains chronically under spent due to a lack of focus on the scheme and inadequate, inefficient state administrative machinery.

¶15. (U) On the supply side, extreme poverty due to lack of adequate adult employment opportunities drives parents to send children to work, and on the demand side the sweat shop and brick kiln owners are eager to employ cheap labor in the absence of enforcement of the child labor laws. Though we only examined brick kilns, garment and leather factories, we are convinced that child labor is ubiquitous in other industries as well. An uncaring government and an insensitive civil society ensures that despite anti-child labor laws being in place for over two decades, children continue to be exploited and robbed of their basic rights to health and education, and denied opportunities to realize their full potential.

JARDINE